

Foot washing, remembering, and the search for unity among Christians: a reflection on the logo of *One in Christ*.

Thomas O'Loughlin

Images are among the most potent elements in our memories: we want to see our flag flying high, others will object if another flag is flown 'which should not be,' we watch Trooping the Colour, and we must be careful that the logo of every sponsor of an event is properly displayed. We might find some of these concerns silly, provincial, even parochial – but such images matter and it would be foolish for anyone to claim immunity from their power. Moreover, we know – or at least we always believe we know – what something significant looked like in the past, what it should look like, and, indeed, what it can look like in the future. Anyone who seeks to change these objects or 'sites of memory'¹ not only goes against the grain of how humans construct our identity – and hence such reforms are always slow and complex – but is likely to produce as much heat as light. Here lies one of the great problems of the ecumenical movement: it is easy to agree that one is in favour of that unity for which the Christ prayed (Jn 17:22), it is far harder to detach oneself from images and attitudes that have been ingrained in one's personal and group memory for centuries. Change in such circumstances is, almost invariably, seen as losing something – even when that which is lost is somehow toxic for the group; and for many, any such detachment is seen in terms of betrayal, deviation from the way that has stood them well in the past, and something which demands vigorous resistance. The question of the Eucharist provides us with a case in point: all look back to it as an image, indeed as an image of unity, and yet it is the issue that provokes the greatest friction not only in formal discussions of ecumenism, but in any community. Often behind these hardened positions stands an image of what the Eucharist is about and then, in turn, of the Last Supper.

So what was the Last Supper like? Our starting point is not with the texts in the, now canonical, scriptures – for those five accounts are themselves the products of communities' remembering and representing to themselves a salient memory that contributed to making sense of their own practices. Rather, it is the images that we have now of that object in our memories known as 'the Last Supper.' How would you draw it? Do you imagine it as a great, long table with Jesus in the middle and twelve men around the table? What would you show on the table: a full meal or just bread and wine? How would these be shown: many individual tumblers as in that by Leonardo da Vinci, or a single cup, or should we refer to that as a chalice? How does one show the bread? Is it a single loaf to be shared by all or a dish of bread ready for use by many? Is it a normal loaf, such as one would buy from a baker's shop, or some sort of unleavened wafer? What is Jesus doing in the image? Is he speaking or silently handling the cup or loaf? Is he 'blessing' one or other item with his hand in the same way that a priest blesses an object or a congregation? Is he motionless – presenting something – or is he doing something such as breaking a loaf or passing a cup? Does the group include women – and if so where are they located: at table or serving the table? Are they sitting on chairs / forms or reclining on couches? Is the overall image an illustration of a great event recorded in the Bible – akin to the relationship between

¹ I am using the language of Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago and London 1992 [original French 1941 and 1952]).

‘the Pilgrims Landing on Plymouth Rock’ and American identity – or is it an idealisation of something continual – akin to the Tube Map when getting around London?

On virtually every point mentioned, there is conflict among Christians and the different images map onto different theological positions, differing ways of doing theology, and different practices often perceived as invariable. If Jesus is seen as ‘blessing’ an object, then, in effect, the image is a retrojection of the actions of a modern ritual actor – and almost certainly he will see himself as a *sacerdos* and as he is ‘an *alter Christus*,’ so the image is that of another parish priest. If, on the other hand, the image is full of local colour, strives after ‘realism,’ and has a mixed group of disciples (see Mk 14:16), then the notion that the various accounts in ‘the bible’ are themselves ideal constructions of memory produced in the churches will be rejected in a scramble for ‘facts’ in the life of the historical Jesus. Our images of the Last Supper are so potent, that when they come into contact with ideas we otherwise find unproblematic, the result is often conflict and the image wins the day. Moreover, the image is usually the base upon which, and around which, we arrange the various ‘bits’ of our remembering. So, for example, we have little difficulty in having a scene like that of Leonardo in mind as we read the discourses of that evening from John’s gospel (Jn 13-17) despite the fact that John makes no mention of ‘an institution of the Eucharist’ and has no ‘eucharistic words.’² Just as the crib-scene reconciles / harmonizes the conflicting infancy narratives, so our Last Supper images cover over all the difficulties in the stories of that supper, the differences between them, and their very different theologies associated with that memory found in Paul, the gospel writers, and in other references in early Christian texts.

That this is the case can be very easily demonstrated. Despite the fact that the central *action* of Jesus in the memory of that evening in John’s gospel is his washing the feet of his disciples, it is rarely recalled as a Last Supper image. Occasionally, late medieval artists left a jug and basin the foreground of their pictures, but only a fraction of the viewers would have linked the narratives. The Last Supper is one image, and seen as related to the on-going life of the churches for it gives ‘the institution of the sacrament,’ and the Foot Washing is another scene: a touching memento of a moment in the life of Jesus akin to his beckoning Zacchaeus down from the tree (Lk 19:5) or meeting the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4).

Here lies the strength of the logo of One in Christ. It rightly identifies that the memory of the Last Supper relates to the goal of Christian unity and that it is the stumbling block that fosters conflicts, in that it portrays the table with a cup and loaf upon it, but is also links that meal to another memory, which within John’s theology is explicitly sacramental, which may allow Christians to move forwards towards that unity which is a key part of John’s presentation of the mind of the Christ. Put another way, can picturing the foot washing as part of a journey towards Christian unity be helpful?

Remembering and Forgetting

² See Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘The “Eucharistic Words of Jesus”: An Un-noticed Silence in our Earliest Sources,’ *Anaphora* 8,1(2014)1-12.

Remembering is an explicitly demanded activity for Christians: we can point to teaching about remembering (e.g. 1 Cor 11:24 or Jn 14:26), we can speculate how at the centre of liturgy is the link between remembering and thanking in contrast with forgetting and ingratitude,³ and we hardly ever gather without reading our ancient texts. Moreover, every church is proud of its ability to remember that which it should remember whether that is thought of as loyalty to the bible or adherence to the tradition; and the greatest slur one can pass on any church is to suggest that they have forgotten something essential. But in the midst of this ecclesial self-praise for the integrity of our memories, there is also the fact that, both as individuals and churches, we forget – and of its nature that which is forgotten passes from our consciousness. While one imagines one knows what one remembers, it is very difficult to have any sense of what one has forgotten! Yet the whole tradition of reform, renewal, and reconnection in the churches is predicated on the notion that we can recall that which has been forgotten!⁴ The new is invariably presented as the old that has slipped our memory. These churches are always remembering, but are simultaneously always forgetting!

We are very conscious that we recall the Last Supper / Eucharist but we do so invariably as the memory streaming backwards from what that means to us now – and so our remembering conflicts with others' memories because no group's memory is complete: in focusing here or there on what the present moment deems salient,⁵ we each forget what another may remember. But, for the most part, we do not remember the foot washing – or, if we do, we think of it as a single moment in the past – as part of our group memory. While there are churches – nearly all having their origins in the sixteenth century reformation – where foot washing is part of their liturgy,⁶ for most churches it is a much more obscure affair. It is either just a biblical scene or else a liturgical rarity performed occasionally among the liturgically enthusiastic. In short, just as the Eucharist is remembered, so foot washing is forgotten.

Inscribed actions

Given that the canonical memory of foot washing, Jn 13:1-20, comes with an explicit instruction that the action should be repeated by the disciples, indeed it is declared to be an example for imitation,⁷ this marginalization within our ecclesial memories is very interesting. Why was one action remembered and fixed firmly in our minds,

³ This linkage of *anamnesis* / *eucharistia* : *amnesia* / *acharistia* was developed in detail by Philo – and it underpins much of the reflection of the early followers of Jesus; see Jean LaPorte, *Eucharistia in Philo* (New York, NY, 1983), 42-7.

⁴ See Gerhard B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA, 1959).

⁵ See B. Schwartz, 'The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory,' *Social Forces* 61(1982)374-402.

⁶ See Thomas O'Loughlin, *Washing Feet: Imitating the Example of Jesus in the Liturgy Today* (Collegeville, MN, 2015), 1-30.

⁷ Jn 13:14-15: 'If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you [plural] also ought to wash (*opheilete*) one another's feet. For I have given you an example (*hupodeigma*), that you [plural] also should (*poiéte*) do as I have done to you.'

when the other has not even been seen by most Christians?⁸ The most obvious point about foot washing is that it is awkward: it is now, and it always has been. In the ancient world it was the task of the lowliest female slaves, and while it may be revolutionary as a prophetic action, it was seen as subversive of good social order.⁹ And, whenever it has made an appearance on our ritual horizon, it has been criticised as dangerous in one way or another. All involved in ecumenical endeavour should note this: we remember most that which pleases us, and that which is disturbing of our sense of comfort we push to one side.

Memory, moreover, is usually thought of as a matter of the mind, but our deepest memories are always bodily inscribed, we remember because we have done something over and over and over again.¹⁰ That which we do regularly becomes, quite literally, part of us. We have ways of doing this or that, and these ways become habitual, such that we find it hard to change the 'habits of a lifetime.' So, for example, different churches have different ways of celebrating the Eucharist – and these patterns of activity are so ingrained that they survive changes in rubrics, texts, and theology. By contrast, that which is rarely done does not inscribe itself in our learned behaviour and each time it is performed requires fresh consideration, deliberation, and decision – and within that process there is a weighing of 'pros' and 'cons' and we just might decide against it. For example, if one were to ask a Catholic presbyter to preside at Mass, he could do so without a second thought: how to preside is so deeply inscribed in his memory that it is 'second nature.' But ask the same man to preside at a foot washing and there will be, at best, a look of bewilderment. How does one do this? Should one do it? What will people expect? Have we the necessary permission? Have we a suitable bowl, towel, jug, ... ? Do we really need to do it? Perhaps we should just postpone it until next time when we will have had time to think about it in detail? This process of questioning leading to inaction is not linked in any special way to the action of foot washing, rather it is a human response to any action that is socially awkward. Foot washing is not only a prophetic action by Jesus, but one that can reveal aspects of our human nature as ritual-remembering animals.

That no church took up the command in John 13 and made it part of their regular practice,¹¹ is a sobering reminder to each church about imagining that it preserves the memory of the Christ whole and entire. Foot washing points to the fact that everyone needs to remember some things that have slipped from consciousness, possibly delete some other memories that have lodged themselves in our praxis, and acknowledge that every church can learn from others.

⁸ In most churches a foot washing only occurs on the evening of Holy Thursday which has not established itself as a very popular liturgy; moreover, in those churches where the foot washing is an element in their liturgical books, it is usually an optional ritual which is readily omitted.

⁹ See Janet M. Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Communities in Early America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), 84-6.

¹⁰ See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge 1989), 72-104.

¹¹ It was made either an annual item in a major festival or an event that only took place occasionally. The Eucharist became so inscribed because it was every week – both regular and frequent – already by the time of the *Didache*. The one great exception is that foot washing became a regular, weekly part of monastic practice: see O'Loughlin, *Washing Feet*, 17-20.

False paths

When on those rare occasions a congregation does observe or engage in a foot washing, it is instructive to ask what they imagine they are doing in this act of remembering. The most common answer – and one that is facilitated by the manner of its liturgical performance – is that this is a great mime.¹² The scene is Holy Thursday evening, the night of the Last Supper, and the text of the pericope from John is read as the gospel lection. Then the Last Supper images flood in: the president imitates the actions of Jesus in removing ‘a garment’ and takes off the chasuble, then wraps himself with a towel and proceeds to wash the feet (or at least pretends to wash one foot¹³) of twelve (the imagined number in the image of the supper) men (and this becomes important since only men / apostles / bishops are imagined at that supper) – and any other arrangement encounters resistance as recent reactions to Pope Francis’s new rubrics testify.¹⁴ What is going on: we are acting out on the night of the Last Supper an item from history that is proper to that event. The concern, therefore, is to get the mime historically correct: no women, no more nor less than twelve, and as much verisimilitude to actions of 1950 years ago as possible.

While such mimes are to be found elsewhere in liturgy, even among Catholics, it is an approach that is explicitly rejected with regard to other Last Supper memories. Mime is not sufficient to explain the actions with loaf or cup, nor would one accept that the Eucharist can only be celebrated on one night of the year or that it cannot only be celebrated with twelve men. Mime does, of course, make the memory a safe one: it is not saying anything new to each other about our relationships but simply recalling an unusual one-off event in the life of Jesus. Mime allows to spectate without engaging in the more problematic aspects of our membership of the church which foot washing was intended to challenge. It is also important to note how mime always produces a new reading / interpretation that replaces the reading (i.e. John 13) which is being mimed. In virtually every parish where this takes place and just one person washes the feet of some others (i.e. the parish priest washes the feet of a selection of people) the action becomes an expression, in mime, of a relationship within a particular social hierarchy: the minister to the ministered to. But this – especially interpreted verbally in terms of care of one for others – misses the point of the original message completely. For the evangelist, the whole point of the foot washing is that there is no social hierarchy in the church: there is not one group which is active and giving alongside another which is passive and receiving. Rather, each and every individual is a minister to everyone else, and each is ministered to by everyone else.

¹² See Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘The Washing of Feet: the Interplay of Praxis and Theology,’ *Anaphora* 7/1(2013)37-46; and ‘Celebrating the New Commandment: Foot-washing and our Theology of Liturgy,’ *Scripture in Church* 43 [n. 169] (2013)118-27.

¹³ See Adrian Howells, ‘Foot Washing for the Sole,’ *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 17(2012)128-31 for a devastating critique of the manner in which this ritual can be subverted by ceremonial.

¹⁴ See Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘Foot washing on Holy Thursday: New Rubric, Renewed Paradigm,’ *The Pastoral Review* 12/2(2016)10-3.

An element of the text of John is that this action is that of a master acting as a slave to give an example, and so the obvious example involved is that of humility. Once again, this has been a major element in Holy Thursday foot washings: before 1955 it was, among Catholics, only performed by bishops (and other significant leaders¹⁵) and it was to be done to the poor – as an act of charity. In effect, the pope, the emperor, the bishop, sets aside for a moment the order within the human universe of rich / poor, rulers / ruled, VIPs / nobodies, and ‘sets an example.’ The message is actually a fraudulent one because the very act of setting aside status for a moment supposes that a world of hierarchy is what is real. The ritual becomes but another scene in the liturgy of power within society whether there is an actual washing of feet or whether it is a monetary substitute.¹⁶ The real beneficiary is the potentate concerned: good images bolstering an inchoate statement that the *status quo* is the will of God.

But perhaps we should not take the words of John’s gospel seriously: this is one of those strange actions that we ritualise, reflect upon, but put into a parallel ‘spiritual’ world. For example, in Isa 20 we have the tale of the prophet waking naked, and we know that the world needs prophets, but we would not countenance such behaviour in our society today. So while it is the case that Jesus did strange things and made extreme demands – e.g. love you enemies (Mt 5:44) – and we should respect these challenging memories, we should not seek to operationalize them in anything more than a ritualistic way. Foot washing – and notions of mutual service – fall within this category, and so should be performed *for* people, but it should be seen as detached from everyday reality.

What is significant about these last two objections to the ritual is that they invoke an attitude to liturgy that suggests that Christianity is more akin to an idealistic moral philosophy than a vision of a way of life. They invoke, moreover, a notion of religion as that which stands in opposition to everyday experience while, paradoxically, confessing that the Logos became an individual human being dwelling among us (Jn 1:14).

Recalling foot washing has the effect of showing people from a range of churches that they may be far less consistent in their liturgical theology than they might otherwise assert.

*Foot washing as an ecclesiology*¹⁷

If we leave aside notions of the foot washing in John 13 as a curious tableau from the night before the crucifixion we find that it contains some surprising elements. Firstly, its salience in the evangelist’s memory is that it deals with the nature of the relationships that should exist in the community to whom he is preaching. It is a message about how church members should view their relationships to one another. Each is to see him- or herself as the servant of the others; each is to minister and each

¹⁵ The exception to this, was its use in monasteries; the most important fact is that it was never done in a Catholic parish and so very few people even knew there was such a ceremony, much less has seen it done.

¹⁶ Thus we have the ritual of the Maundy Money in Great Britain.

¹⁷ See Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘From a Damp Floor to a New Vision of Church: Footwashing as a Challenge to Liturgy and Discipleship,’ *Worship* 88(2014)137-150.

is to be ministered to. This is not teaching on church-relationships that is confined to John, even if the action of foot washing is found only with him. In the Synoptics the church is to be distinct in its relationships from those which exist as 'normal' among the gentiles:

their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (Mt 20: 25-7 // Mk 10:43-4 // Lk 12: 25-6).

Far from being a once off, the foot washing contains a core truth about ministry that only came into effect in the future time of the church. There are very few statements that are as clearly linked to later church behaviour as this: it models an ecclesiology of service.

Another aspect of the story in John now comes into view. The modelling of behaviour by Jesus is what the audience's behaviour should be. We are not to imitate Jesus, but rather do what we should do and that ideal behaviour has been imitated by Jesus as an example to us. The presbyter, already convinced of his own unique iconic status as *alter Christus* vis-à-vis those around him, thinks that he now should imitate Jesus and wash others' feet, but such a reading is simply not supported by the text. All those in the church should be washing one another's feet: the presbyter that of his brother, the sister that of the presbyter her brother. Each both washes and is washed – and so a new set of relationships, unique to the disciples of Jesus, is performed. Foot washing, *both* doing *and* having it done to one, is as much a sign of belonging to the community of Jesus as sharing in the loaf or being willing to drink from the cup.¹⁸ 'You ought to wash one another's feet' is addressed to all who hear the gospel in the Church.

Being a member of this new distinctive community of foot washers and of having one's feet washed is to belong now to Christ – it is a share (*meros*) in him, and, significantly, those who reject the new equality that exists in this community are rejecting that share in him. As such, it is a reciprocal covenant of giving and receiving whereby each person is established as a disciple with the community of the Christ. Peter's rejection becomes the foil by which John drums home the message that if it is the 'Teacher and Lord' / 'Lord and Teacher' who washes feet, then all must be willing to do likewise to one another. Foot washing reminds us that ecclesiology is not simply the structures / politics of the Christian group: it is a proclamation of the corporate endeavour of those belonging to the way. We can pray that we might be one in the Christ, but read from the starting point of John discourse, we have to be involved in mutual foot washing if we are to be in Christ. Long debates in the literature on this passage as to whether this has a baptismal / remission of sins dimension misses the point:¹⁹ if one does not embrace the nature of the relationships that the church should

¹⁸ See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The Cup of Discipleship,' *The Pastoral Review* 10/1(2014)38-42

¹⁹ See, for example, John C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield, 1991), and Frank D. Macchia, 'Is Footwashing the Neglected Sacrament? A Theological Response to John Christopher Thomas' *Pneuma* 19(1997)239-49.

exhibit, made visible awkwardly in this action, one cannot share, be one with the Christ.²⁰

Neutral sign

Some years ago Jean Vanier was invited to address a meeting of the World Council of Churches and, based in his experience in L'Arche, he organised a foot washing. His analysis was that actions speak more eloquently than words and that there was someone healthy for all concerned when an Orthodox bishop had to kneel and wash the feet of a black, woman church-leader from America.²¹ Our first reaction is to praise Vanier's brilliance for invoking an action, whose authority none involved could question, which would have taught all involved more than a learned paper. But we should not stop there. Vanier had touched on a basic element of Christian corporate life: if we do not perform our vision of who we are in Christ when we gather, then we may have betrayed the reality we claim to proclaim.

But of all the signs that we need to perform as part of our path toward unity with Christ, foot washing has one special characteristic, already noticed by Vanier and L'Arche: it is a theologically neutral sign. We may find it awkward, distasteful, and that which we seek to avoid, but we cannot point to tomes and centuries of arguments about what it 'means,' how it 'signifies,' who can perform it, nor under what circumstances can it be performed. Due to a tradition of marginalization and neglect, foot washing lies in a theological-conflict-free zone. Ask any group of Christians from a variety of churches if they can celebrate the Eucharist together and the reactions can often tear to shreds the good will that has brought them together in discussions: and each can appeal to an impressive weight of theological evidence as to why *communio in sacris* is, if not impossible, so tense as to be unworkable. The effect is that in many inter-church encounters, the sacramental dimension of our humanity is placed in un-ending *epoche*, a topic best left untouched, and the power that is inherent in ritual to move us beyond theological difference is left untapped. But there is no body of defensive reflection that circumscribes the mutual washing of feet.

Foot washing, in the context of ecumenism, has also another dimension. If we can imagine bishops, ministers, priests, moderators, women and men who are church leaders all engaged in a single action of mutual service, we have a very different perspective on what unity looks like and feels like. We have a situation where each must see her/himself as a servant and having to learn from the others, all being aware of what that there is much that each church has forgotten. Their various titles, ranks, and ways of dressing all testify to remembering; the strange ritual to the fact that all forget. Much ecumenical 'discussion' slips almost unawares into the errant child being re-integrated or the stubborn old-timer finally facing and when this happens those concerned has slipped into a hierarchical model of relationships: one is the giver, the other the receiver, one the part of the trunk, the other the errant branch. But

²⁰ O'Loughlin, *Washing Feet*, 53-68.

²¹ See Catherine Anderson and Sandra Carroll. "The Foot-Washing in John 13:1-20 in the context of *L'Arche*," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 20 (2013)185-96; for Jean Vanier's own views on foot washing, see his *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes our Feet* (Toronto, 1996), and *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus Through the Gospel of John* (Ottawa, 2004).

foot washing allows each to discover, perhaps for the first time in shared liturgy, a different set of relationships: each sharing equally with the other and each open to learning. But do we actually need to do it? If we know this, could we not avoid all the mess – not to mention the embarrassment? This question – so often heard – actually cuts to the base of all human ritual activity and fails to take account of who we are as ritual using, ritual making beings. By the very fact that foot washing is a ritual action, rather than an everyday action (e.g. putting on our shoes) demonstrates that we know that it brings before us that which we know should be the case among Christians.²² If we are to be fellow disciples, we must be fellow servants. And, foot washing is a modelling, in our bodies and so in the depth of our identities, of the nature of the church and its unity.

How significant that when the logo of One in Christ was created, we are given a clear reference to Eucharist, the centre and summit, of union with Christ by the presence of a loaf and cup on the common table, but the focus of attention is the action of foot washing. It is as if we must start there, and then progress to the next action of blessing and thanking the Father as we share that cup and loaf.

The mutual washing of feet as part of our celebrations of who we are is alien to the experience of the majority of Christians today. Yet it has impeccable precedents – not only in the gospel according to John but in the practice of monks where it both welcomes the stranger and models mutual service – and more ‘sure warrants’ for its performance in our gathering than almost anything else. Perhaps by unlocking its power to show us who we are as disciples it can help us to overcome our divisions and move toward that unity, in loaf and cup, which can seem so far away.²³

²² See Jonathan Z. Smith, *To take place: towards theory in ritual* (Chicago, 1987), 109-10.

²³ For a variety of ecumenical situations where a foot washing is shared gospel-inspired ritual of reconciliation and unity in the Christ, see O’Loughlin, *Foot Washing*, 87-111.